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Taking Stock: Documenting Russia's Modern Heritage



In a review of writings from the 1960s on the Modern Movement in Russia, S. Frederick Starr reminded his readers of Sybil Moholy-Nagy's remark that Erich Mendelsohn had the "unspeakably bad luck not to be mentioned by Mr. Giedion" in his *Space, Time, and Architecture*.¹ Moholy-Nagy likened Mendelsohn's omission from Giedion's influential textbook to "a historical death sentence."² The Modern Movement in Russia had suffered much the same fate until a boom in publications in the 1960s brought the achievements of this extraordinary chapter of modernism into general recognition both within the Soviet Union and abroad. Starr ascribed the neglect of the Russian movement to the unavailability of information to Western scholars and to political pressures placed on Soviet historians to avoid the output of the 1920s, which Nikita Khrushchev had characterized as being "ugly as sin."³ Although the many articles, books, and exhibitions of the 1960s devoted to the first two decades of Soviet modernism had changed the situation dramatically, the wave of interest in Soviet architecture had yet to bring about the restoration of any of the built work of the 1920s.

Today the architecture of Soviet modernism is threatened not by historical obscurity but by physical neglect and rapid real estate development. This new mode of endangerment calls for a different kind of engagement with the architecture of this period. The research carried out in the 1960s and 1970s assured a place for Soviet modernism in the historical record, yet the most widely circulated accounts of the Modern Movement in Russia have emphasized the unrealized "paper projects" of the 1920s.⁴ Now that the buildings of the Modern Movement are in danger of being erased from the historical city, preservationists, historians, and photographers have turned their attention to the tangible structures that are still standing. The documentary character of many recent publications on the Modern Movement in Russia reflects the urgency of the task at hand—to record the architectural legacy of the Soviet Union before it is lost forever. A decade and a half of stocktaking has both expanded our view of the quantitative output of the Soviet architectural vanguard and deepened our understanding of the physical state of the iconic buildings of the 1920s.

The first attempts at documenting the built legacy of Russian modernism have come in the form of architectural guides.



Credit is due to the international architectural journal *Proekt Rossiia/Project Russia* for its documentation on cities often overlooked in accounts of Soviet architecture. Olga Orel'skaia's guide to Nizhnyi Novgorod initiated *Proekt Rossiia's* series of articles on the twentieth-century architecture in Russia's regional capitals.⁵ For the first time an Anglophone audience can read about monuments such as A. Iakovlev's Communal house in Nizhnyi Novgorod, which uses the same split-level floor plans as Moisei Ginzburg's Narkomfin building in Moscow. Ekaterina Shorban's guide to Ivanovo-Voznesensk documents both an early prefabricated housing settlement designed by Leonid Vesnin and Il'ia Golosov's dynamic House of the Collective of 1929–31.⁶ A. M. Gustov's remarkable Tartar Republic House of Print of 1932–35 is documented in drawings and archival photographs in Sergei Sanichin's guide to the Modern architecture of Kazan.⁷ Other cities covered include Iaroslavl', Khabarovsk, Rostov on the Don, Tver, Ekaterinburg, and Saint Petersburg/Leningrad. *Proekt Rossiia's* series of architectural guides provides a wealth of hitherto unavailable graphic documentation. Each guide includes a map and short descriptive texts. This series reminds us that the Modern Movement in Russia was not confined to Moscow and Leningrad, and that the surviving building stock is vast.

Proekt Rossiia's architectural guides have produced two book-length studies of Russian cities. Ivan Nevzgodin's *The Architecture of Novosibirsk* chronicles the history and urban development of this twentieth-century boomtown.⁸ Nevzgodin's richly illustrated book supplies a vivid account of the transformation of the trading post of Novonikolaevsk into the metropolis of Siberia. Arranged chronologically, the book showcases the development of Russian architectural styles from the Neo-Byzantine of Saint Alexander Nevsky Cathedral to the Khrushchev-era modernism of the city's Akademgorodok, or academic campus. Nevzgodin documents design modifications that occur both during and after construction. His discussion of the Prombank building, designed by Alexander Shvidkovskii, Georgii Gol'ts, and Sergei Kozhin, provides rarely seen images of the project from the 1920s as well as construction photographs of the building's later expansion into the Municipal Executive Committee through the addition of several floors and a pilastered façade. Such glimpses into the fate of Modern buildings are rare. Vitalii Stadnikov and Oleg Fedorov's *Samara: Guide to Modern Architecture* is the second book to grow out of *Proekt Rossiia's* city guides.⁹ In a lengthy introduction, Stadnikov and Fedorov describe the reemergence of a city that was waning at the time of the October Revolution. The collection of eighty-one buildings presented in this guide gives us a new view of Soviet architectural and

urban development, one that is full of complexities that are not often discussed in histories of Modern architecture.

The recent interest in documenting Russia's Modern architecture has produced a new book about Moscow as well. *Moscow Architecture 1920–1960*, a project directed by Sergei Tkachenko and with texts by Natalia and Anna Bronovitskaia, is a welcome addition to the literature on the architecture of the capital.¹⁰ The book's introduction provides an informed summary of the city's architectural trends and major urban-planning proposals. This guide complements Alessandra Latour's *Mosca, 1890–1991* with contemporary photographs, descriptions in English, and greater chronological focus.¹¹ Anna Bronovitskaia and Tatiana Tsareva have produced a detailed map as a companion to *Moscow Architecture 1920–1960*. Dispensing with textual descriptions, the map identifies more than three hundred of Moscow's Modern buildings. The map will become an indispensable tool for those in search of Moscow's Modern heritage.

Both *Moscow Architecture 1920–1960* and its complementary map are products of the increasingly active movement for the preservation of Modern monuments in Russia. The publications appeared on the occasion of the international conference Heritage at Risk: Preservation of Twentieth Century Architecture and World Heritage that took place in Moscow in April 2006. This event brought the endangered state of Russia's Modern heritage to the attention of the international preservation community. The publications issuing from this conference allow us to see the problems confronting Russia's Modern monuments in global and local contexts. The conference proceedings have been published as a richly illustrated, Russian/English bilingual volume.¹² Selected papers also appear in a special issue of the ICOMOS journal *Heritage at Risk*, which is devoted entirely to Soviet heritage and European modernism.¹³

This pair of publications presents diverse approaches to Modern heritage in a variety of national contexts. Unfortunately, the documentation suggests that Russia is far behind the United States and Western European nations in the movement to preserve twentieth-century buildings. A series of case studies illustrates both the potential of exemplary restoration projects and the consequences of neglect. The restoration of the Bauhaus building and masters' houses in Dessau, the Einstein Tower in Potsdam, Chicago's IIT campus, and the iconic Villa Savoye outside of Paris are described as model achievements in the preservation of twentieth-century buildings. The situation in Russia is radically different. Although the detailed documentation of structures such as the Narkomfin building and Ivan Nikolaev's communal house is a welcome contribution

to the historical literature, the current state of the buildings is distressing. These monuments are crumbling, and their condition will only devolve unless action is taken to save them.

The proceedings of the Moscow conference also contain proposals for the preservation and reuse of several of Moscow's Modern structures. The renovation of the Moscow Planetarium and the restoration and conversion of Melnikov's Burevestnik Factory Club are discussed in detail. Aleksei Ginzburg proposes the conversion of his grandfather's Nar-komfin building into a hotel. Other proposals include the conversion of Konstantin Melnikov's Bakhmet'evskii Bus Depot into a sport and leisure complex and the use of Ivan Nikolaev's communal house as a dormitory. Although specialists may debate the aims and methods of such projects, the fact that architects and clients are ready to imagine contemporary uses for these important buildings is a welcome and necessary development.

Among the international parties interested in Russia's Modern heritage, the German/Russian partnership is particularly strong. Recalling the close ties between Soviet and German architectural cultures that brought, among others, Ernst May, Bruno Taut, and the former Bauhaus director Hannes Meyer to Russia, contemporary scholars and preservationists are building professional relationships between the two countries. The current exchange between German and Russian scholars continues a dialogue that began with the 1995 conference of the German National Committee of ICOMOS devoted to the preservation of Stalinist architecture.¹⁴ This earlier discussion focused on the politics of preserving Berlin's Karl-Marx-Allee, formerly known as Stalinallee, which took inspiration from urban projects such as Moscow's Tverskaia Street. Today German and Russian scholars are engaged in an open dialogue about the common issues facing Modern heritage in each national context. Anke Zalivako deserves special recognition for her role in this exchange. She has persuasively argued that the materials used by Russian architects in the 1920s are comparable to those used in Weimar Germany. Thus the lessons learned from the preservation of structures such as the Bauhaus building and masters' houses in Dessau have great relevance for future preservation projects in Russia.

The Moscow Architecture Preservation Society, or MAPS, has become a significant voice in the campaign to preserve Moscow's Modern heritage. MAPS is an international organization of architects and journalists that works to raise awareness about the endangerment of the city's historical buildings. The organization documents current threats to Moscow buildings on its informative Web site,¹⁵ which contains the latest

news about the endangerment of the city's architectural heritage. In a lengthy report released in 2007, MAPS documented the great number of buildings that are currently under threat in Moscow.¹⁶ The report differs from the other recent publications devoted to preservation in Moscow by its inclusion of a much broader range of material. The contributors to "Moscow Architecture at Crisis Point" supplement the current focus on Modern heritage with documentation on a selection of buildings erected between the late eighteenth century and the late twentieth century. MAPS distinguishes itself through its commitment to protect a broad range of historic structures in Russia's capital.

The "Moscow Declaration on the Preservation of Twentieth Century Heritage" synthesizes many of the aims and motivations expressed at the Heritage at Risk conference held in Moscow in 2006.¹⁷ In addition to appeals to authorities and professional organizations to safeguard twentieth-century properties from damage and neglect, the declaration recommends the placement of seven buildings on the World Heritage tentative list. The buildings recommended are Moisei Ginzburg's Narkomfin building; Konstantin Melnikov's Rusakov club, Kauchuk club, and private house; Ivan Nikolaev's communal house; Vladimir Shukhov's Shabolovskaia Radio Tower; and the Maiakovskaia Metro Station by Aleksei Dushkin. Each of these seven structures represents a singular achievement in Moscow's architectural history. One hopes that the momentum gathered around these buildings will spread to other Russian cities that have not had the benefit of international attention.

The net result of the recent surge in publications devoted to Russia's Modern heritage is an enriched understanding of the buildings erected in the 1920s and early 1930s. Thanks to the research of numerous scholars it is now easier than ever to appreciate the built legacy of Russia's Modern Movement in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and many other cities that have, until recently, escaped our view of this important contribution to twentieth-century architecture. Yet now that we have an inventory, what are we going to do with it? The guidebooks and case studies that have appeared in recent years have demonstrated that the building stock of Russia's Modern Movement is extensive. The next step is to ensure that Russia's Modern heritage remains culturally relevant. An exemplary restoration project might generate more support for this unique aspect of Russia's built environment. Historians will have no small role to play in this project. The recent attention directed to the physical structures of Russia's Modern architecture has demonstrated that this movement was not confined

to “paper projects.” It was the task of an earlier generation to save this work from historical obscurity; our duty is to protect these buildings from extinction.

Author Biography

Richard Anderson is a PhD candidate in architectural history and theory at Columbia University. His research focuses on Modern architecture in Germany and the former Soviet Union, most notably during the age of Socialist Realism. He has co-curated, with Kristin Romberg, the exhibition and coauthored the publication *Architecture in Print: Design and Debate in the Soviet Union 1919–1935, Selections from the Collection of Stephen Garmey* (2005). He is writing a book on the development of Modern architecture in Russia.

Notes

¹ S. Frederick Starr, “Writings from the 1960s on the Modern Movement in Russia,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 30, no. 2 (1971): 170.

² “Modern Architecture Symposium, Sunday Session,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 24, no. 1 (1965): 82.

³ Cited in Starr, “Writings from the 1960s on the Modern Movement in Russia,” 170.

⁴ Each of the widely read textbooks on modern architecture by Banham (1960), Tafuri and Dal Co (1976), Frampton (1980), Curtis (1981), and Colquhoun (2002) emphasizes unrealized projects over built works. This trend began as early as 1929 with El Lissitzky’s *Russland: Die Rekonstruktion der Architektur in der Sowjetunion*.

⁵ Olga Orel’skaia, “Putevoditel’ po arkhitekture Nizhnego Novgoroda,” *Proekt Rossiia* 4 (1997): 49–64.

⁶ Ekaterina Shorban, “Ivanovo-Voznesensk 1920-kh godov: ‘Tret’ia proletarskaia stolitsa,” *Proekt Rossiia* 18:73–88.

⁷ Sergei Sanachin, “Sovetskaia Kazan’ v arkhitekturnoi istorii goroda,” *Proekt Rossiia* 24 (2002): 74–88.

⁸ I. V. Nevzgodin, *Arkhitectura Novosibirska* (Novosibirsk: Izd-vo Sibirskogo otdeleniia Rossiiskoi akademii nauk, 2005).

⁹ Vitalii Stadnikov and Oleg Fedorov, *Samara, 81 arkhitekturnyi shedevr: putevoditel’ po sovremennoi arkhitekture* (Moscow: Zhiraf, 2006).

¹⁰ Sergei Tkachenko, Natalia Bronovitskaia, and Anna Bronovitskaia, *Arkhitectura Moskv, 1920–1960: putevoditel’ / Moscow Architecture, 1920–1960: GuideBook* (Moscow: Iz-vo Zhiraf, 2006).

¹¹ Alessandra Latour, *Mosca, 1890–1991*, 1st ed., *Guida all’architettura moderna* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1992).

¹² Aleksandr Kudriavtsev and Natalia Dushkina, eds., *XX vek sokhranenie kul’turnogo nasledii / 20th Century Preservation of Cultural Heritage* (Moscow: n.p., 2006).

¹³ Jörg Hasperl and Michael Petzet, eds., *Heritage at Risk: The Soviet Heritage and European Modernism* (Berlin: Hendrik Bäßer Verlag, 2007).

¹⁴ International Council on Monuments and Sites, German National Committee, *Stalinistische Architektur unter Denkmalschutz? ICOMOS-Hefte des Deutschen Nationalkomitees* 20 (Munich: Vertrieb K. M. Lipp, 1996).

¹⁵ www.maps-moscow.com.

¹⁶ Moscow Architecture Preservation Society, *Moscow Heritage at Crisis Point* (Moscow: MAPS, 2007).

¹⁷ See Hasperl and Petzet, eds., *Heritage at Risk: The Soviet Heritage and European Modernism*, 11.